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Strange Loops

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At first it's just the boots. Then, as you descend the staircase to the lower floor of Castlefield Gallery, it becomes clear that the boots on the floor are attached to a body under the stairs. Had Chris Burden kicked the kunst one too many times, and now the bucket as well? But closer inspection reveals this is a body that died happy – a rigid counterpart to the fluid nude descending Duchamp's stairs. Like the rest of *Born After 1924*, Gregor Schneider's *Man Lying Down with Stiff Cock* (2004) operates in the fertile shadows of death and art history.

Organised around 'Nasci', the theme of Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* magazine issue 8/9, from 1924, *Born After 1924* is artist Ingo Gerken's 'arrangement' of something between a recitation and a reappropriation of Schwitters's concerns. As part of an ongoing season celebrating Schwitters's refugee-time in England's northwest, Gerken has subtly transformed the gallery itself into a Merzian gesamtkunstwerk, to complement and conduct the works (including his own) installed throughout the space. In myriad ways and through divergent means, they amply demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Schwitters's idea of 'Nasci' ('to be born, to become or come into being, everything that develops, forms or moves through its own force') and of the importance of salvage, recovery and reuse.

Beyond the stiff, Gerken's *We Die* (2011) dominates the space – piles of old art magazines, ostensibly concerned with death and the arts of darkness, surround a chair on which a copy of *Flash Art*, featuring Victor Man's untitled work (neon letters spelling 'we die') on the cover, is placed. Round the corner, Tim Noble & Sue Webster's *TrasHeaD* (1999) creates an appropriately grotty, grotto feel to the gallery's rear chamber, with their carefully recombined rubbish casting a beautiful and haunting shadow on the wall – two precisely rendered heads, facing each other inches apart, impaled in silhouette. It takes a while to realise that the lift parts leaning against the opposite wall are actually part of the gallery's disabled-access elevator, deconstructed by Antonia Low to reveal the industrial elegance of the machine's mechanisms.

Upstairs, on the small mezzanine, is a blackened desk littered with burnt-looking Beuysian debris. At the centre of Matti Isan Blind's *Looking for a Ride to Your Secret Location* (2010), a magnetically driven sphere sporadically, fitfully erodes part of the desk around a prismlike pillar, leaving its own sedimented trace in the hollow it has made. Hanging above is a strange fusion of a junk-shop chandelier and a headdress made for Helena Bonham Carter, all dangling threads and black, lacelike gauze, faded crystal and broken, wire-bound sticks. A charred feeling lingers, as if these were the unscattered remains, the minor ruins of a civilisational catastrophe.

Blind's work, like Gerken's arrangement as a whole, productively engages the creative tension in W.G. Sebald's tragic observation that 'every new thing is already touched by the shadow of annihilation'. However, there is also hope here, as Gerken and Co show the possibilities of working in and through the productive dirt created by the breakdown of old objects and old orders, which, in a time that requires ever more frequent endings in order to satiate its thirst for beginnings, is not only aesthetically rewarding, but socially responsible. The death of Castlefield Gallery's Arts Council grant poignantly confirms the salience and potentiality of this approach. *Benjamin Tallis*



Born After 1924

Castlefield Gallery, Manchester
18 February – 10 April

Strange Loops

Generator Projects, Dundee

6 March – 24 April

In her 1994 essay 'Deciphering the Rules of Unruly Disciplines', the literary critic N. Katherine Hayles used an anecdote about Mark Twain to illustrate the ways in which 'difference can be generated out of sameness and, indeed, how it can come about *because* of sameness'. The story goes that Twain bet a friend that he could get an audience to laugh at an atrociously unfunny joke. At his next speech he told the joke and no one laughed. After a long pause, he told it again. The second time, a few people laughed. After another long pause, he launched into it yet again – and this time brought down the house. As Hayles highlights, Twain used the same words, the same intonation, the same audience, yet the mere act of repetition brought about a difference. The same principle is true of *Strange Loops*, a group exhibition curated by artist Craig Mulholland.

As with any of Mulholland's endeavours, the exhibition is refreshingly cerebral. The title, for example, is taken from Douglas Hofstadter's 2007 book *I Am a Strange Loop*, which looks at the properties of self-referential systems and 'tangled hierarchies' in which there is no highest or lowest level (movement through levels leads back to the original level). In Carmel O'Brien's work, these ideas are made manifest as surrealist garments, such as the skirt composed of a Möbius strip whose surface appears as leather, but is paper. Mulholland's own work, after Magritte, also works with self-similarity. In *This Is Not a Message* (all works 2011) we are instructed that the words we are reading are not a message, but of course they are, and round and round we go.

But there are more strange loops here than the conspicuously self-referential works themselves. Before Mulholland's curatorial *unheimlich* manoeuvre is revealed, the exhibition appears as a collection of modernist sculptures – archetypal autonomous objects. On moving into the second space, however, the visitor is compelled to do a double take, to stand in the doorway between the spaces in an effort to make sense of what is in front (and behind). It is only on moving into the third and final space that we see that the whole exhibition is repeated in triplicate.

And it doesn't end there, for we're not looking at a 'straight' repeat. In each iteration the works decrease in scale (or increase, depending on where you begin), with the artists instructed to make work in accordance with the ratio of the space. Sacha Imrie's wall-based sculptures exemplify how repetition allows for signification (and conversely, how such objects might fail as single units). Similarly, Raydale Dower's *Cadence* is a sound piece on a delay set to the dimensions of the room, further adding to the viewer's sense of disorientation. And seen as a series, Sovay Berriman's sculptural forms can be read as monumental arrows, propelling us forward until we are back where we began. Not least, the exhibition asks us to consider curatorial cause and effect – just whose show is this? Are the artists authors? Or is this a 'total work of art', made collectively yet following rules set by an individual? Like the exhibition itself, there is no conclusion or resolution to these questions, just an endless circularity. *Susannah Thompson*



Carmel O'Brien, *Mirror*, giclee print, acrylic on paper, interfacing, 2011. Courtesy Generator Projects, Dundee, and Ross Fraser McLean